

IN PERSPECTIVE

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IMPACT

Subtly or dramatically, architecture impacts our society. The Pruitt-Igoe complex in St. Louis was demolished by dynamite in 1976 because, in part, it was an architectural failure.



By contrast, Toronto's New City Hall, completed in 1965, had a notably salutary impact. Mohammad Basefat, an architect, and Jo Knelsen, a history student, have constructed a model of it to illustrate the CMA's exhibit about architectural impact.

- Peter Brueckner



Mohammad Basefat.



Jo Knelsen.

A CIVIC SYMBOL

Toronto's Old City Hall, built in 1899, was outdated by mid-century. After some acrimonious debate, Mayor Nathan Phillips established an architectural competition to find a suitable replacement. Published requirements for the building and a public square drew 514 proposed designs from around the world.

Viljo Revell, a Finnish architect and the winner, had submitted a modernist design which was seen to best address the functional, social and aesthetic requirements. The evolution of Revell's concept can be seen in the models of the initial idea, a more developed stage and the final version that was approved by City Council. Unfortunately, Revell died in 1964 and never saw the building completed the following year. Although there were some adverse comments, the design was generally well received. A more significant measure of its impact has been the performance of New City Hall over the subsequent sixty years.

Perhaps most importantly, the design is held to elegantly express the building's purpose as a seat of municipal government in a democratic tradition. The structure is distinctive but does not overwhelm its surroundings. Curved towers of unequal height sheltering a dome achieve a careful balance in massing. Decorative entry doors and a spacious internal two level promenade create a complex that is inviting and functional.

Placing the council chamber in the middle symbolizes the central role of municipal administration with the mayor's and councilors' offices located under and concentrically around it. Visitors are cordially welcomed through a well laid out and open foyer with easy access to the services the city provides.

From its inauguration, Nathan Phillips Square has fulfilled its purpose as a public gathering place for celebrations and events in all seasons. The elevated walkway delineates the square and separates it from



The CMA's model of Toronto's New City Hall and Nathan Phillips Square, as they were in 1965. Scale 1:200.

surrounding buildings. This design feature allows unimpeded access along most of the perimeter but still clearly defines the square's extent. Provision for activities such as performances and skating draws local crowds as well as tourists. Indeed, these reflect cosmopolitan cultural values consistent with the multicultural nature of Canada.

Technically, the building's style is brutalist. However, the refined lines of the design and such details as the addition of marble chips to the concrete forming the external walls ensure that it is not too brutal.

Though modernism had come to Toronto a few decades earlier, it had not had much impact on the city's architecture by the 1960s.

Image 1: Demolition of the First Buildings at Pruitt-Igoe. Michael J. Baldrige. unseenstlouis.substack.com/p/the-failed-promise-of-pruitt-igoe.

Bibliography

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The striking design of New City Hall provided an impetus for change and helped to pave the way for other prominent modernist buildings such as the Toronto Dominion Centre (by van der Rohe) and Roy Thomson Hall (by Erickson). The building is generally acknowledged as one of the underlying forces that transformed Toronto from a somewhat somnolent municipality into a world-class metropolis. This was pivotal in the evolution of the city into Canada's financial centre and a hub for business.

While it is impossible to rigorously quantify the impact of a building, a significant unit of value that counts towards its worth is its role in civic life. In that context New City Hall has been distinguished by its adoption as the symbol for the City of Toronto.

- Jo Knelsen

Armstrong, Christopher. *Making Toronto Modern: Architecture and Design, 1895-1975*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014.

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